

BRIEFLY

428 Indonesian hajis dead: The number of Indonesians who died during the Hajj pilgrimage to Makkah has increased to 428, with most succumbing to health problems, old age and heat stroke, a Religious Affairs Ministry official said yesterday. AFP reports from Jakarta.

Ministry spokesman Sutarto said 428 Indonesian pilgrims died because of heart and lung diseases and heat strokes, adding that most of the victims were more than 60 years old.

Seven Indonesians were among 270 people killed in a stampede in Makkah last week.

Greek threat to close border: Greek Foreign Minister Carlos Papoulias said Monday that Athens would close its border to Albanian migrant workers if bilateral relations continued to deteriorate. AFP reports from Athens.

As tension between the two nations increased, Papoulias said "Albanian President Sali Berisha should know before firing off impudent accusations against Greece that we provide work for 400,000 Albanians."

The outburst came a day after Albania called on the international community to investigate Athens' war cries directed at Tirana, which the latter claimed were a Greek device to "create a new Bosnia in the Balkans."

Indian heatwave death toll 91: At least 91 people died in India's two states of Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh this summer as an intense heat wave swept the northern and the central parts of the country, press reports said yesterday. Xinhua reports from New Delhi.

The death toll in Rajasthan rose to 88 with reports of 18 more deaths from various districts while three people died in Madhya Pradesh (MP). Unofficial sources put the MP toll at five.

Bundi and Dholpur in Rajasthan and Vidisha in MP were the hottest places with 49 degrees Celsius as the mercury generally registered up to six degrees Celsius above the normal temperature level for the past 24 hours, the reports said.



An armed former Fatah Hawk Palestinian greets prisoners released on Monday from the Ketzot army prison camp in the Negev desert of southern Israel upon their arrival in Gaza City. — AFP photo

4 Sikhs killed in gunfight: Police shot and killed four Sikh guerrillas after a gunfight in the northern state of Punjab and recovered a cache of arms and ammunition, police said Tuesday. AP reports from Chandigarh.

Punjab's police chief Kanwar Pal Singh Gill told a news conference that one of the guerrillas killed on Monday night was suspected to be a Pakistani national who trained Sikh militants to use weapons.

Police recovered 43 Chinese-made assault rifles, 117 magazines, 50 kilograms (110 lbs) of explosives, two rockets and 15,000 bullets.

Khmers reject truce offer

PHNOM PENH: May 31: The government has no choice but to continue fighting because the Khmer Rouge rebels flatly rejected a truce offer, the premier said Tuesday upon returning from failed peace talks, reports Reuter.

Premier Prince Norodom Ranariddh spoke after returning to Phnom Penh from the talks last Friday and Saturday in Pyongyang, North Korea.

"In Pyongyang ... we lost the unique opportunity of putting an end to the fighting in Cambodia and to resolving the remaining Cambodian problems through peaceful means," he said.

At the talks, Khmer Rouge President Khieu Samphan rejected national reconciliation leader King Norodom Sihanouk's call for an unconditional truce starting June 15, the premier said.

Instead, Khieu Samphan

Woerner won't attend NATO FMs' meet in Turkey

BRUSSELS: May 31: NATO Secretary General Manfred Woerner, who has been battling cancer, said Tuesday he will not attend a key alliance meeting of foreign ministers next week in Istanbul, Turkey, reports AP.

"My doctors advise me that I risk delaying further my return to full-time duty if I go to Istanbul," he said in a letter to ambassadors of the 16 nations of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation.

Woerner said he intended to "continue a short-term absence in order to ensure my long-term availability."

France's window into India' losing French flavour

PONDICHERRY, India: May 31: Four decades after Pondicherry joined the Indian union, nearly 10,000 French nationals remain in this former French colony on the shores of the Bay of Bengal, reports AFP.

But their numbers are shrinking every year and French influence is dwindling in this coastal strip of southern India which former Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru once said he hoped would remain "France's window into India."

"It's very worrying," Amal Arago, a 68-year-old mathematics teacher at the local

French lycee, said of the exodus. "Many young people leave for France and don't come back."

Arago, who publishes "Trait d'union," a bulletin aimed at providing "a link between France and India," said the use of French has also fallen dramatically.

The knowledge of French here is on the decline and in a few more decades I wonder how many people will still speak it," he said.

"There is no future for the French in Pondicherry," added Arago, who is close to retirement after a teaching career which has taken him to French

schools in Laos, Morocco and the Ivory Coast.

More than 300 years of French domination have nevertheless left their mark on Pondicherry, which has a population of about 800,000 and the flavour of a French country town in the tropics.

Numerous streets in the French quarter have retained their French names: rue Dumaine, rue de la Caserne, rue Mahe de Bourdonnais.

Some 1,400 of the French here live off civilian or military pensions, many of them former soldiers who served in Indochina or Algeria. Their pensions of between 3,000 and

7,000 francs a month represent a considerable sum in India.

Arago said that because of the largesse of the French government, the French community here is subject to "some jealousy" from the local population. "People say we are responsible for prices going up," he said.

Of the five French possessions in India at independence in 1947, the first to join India was Chandernagore, following a referendum in 1950.

Pondicherry, Mahe, Karaikal and Yanam followed suit in 1954 but their formal adhesion to the Indian Union did not

come about until 1962, with the ratification of a Franco-Indian treaty.

Many of the French here have never actually set foot in France, as is the case with Zearamassandirayer, who opted for French nationality in 1962 and taught at the local lycee from 1942 until his retirement in 1973.

The 80-year-old former professor's passion for France is monumental (he has read nearly 400 books about Napoleon), but has not been passed on to his two children, both of whom have acquired Indian nationality.

Honecker died of cancer in Santiago on Sunday, aged 81.

International



President Francois Mitterrand (R) drinks a toast to German Chancellor Helmut Kohl (L) during the 63rd Franco-German summit at Mulhouse in France on May 30. Claude Monet's "Neige et soleil couchant," can be seen in the background. — AFP photo

UN protests continuing atrocities in Rwanda

500 massacred over weekend

NAIROBI: May 31: The United Nations protested to warring Rwanda factions over continuing atrocities Tuesday following reports that 500 people were massacred over the weekend in Red Cross camps in the south, reports AP.

There was sporadic fighting Tuesday in the capital, Kigali, as UN troops struggled with few men and little equipment to evacuate more people sheltering under their protection in the city, UN spokesman Abdal Kobia said.

Sporadic small-arms fire was heard in Kigali overnight and early Tuesday, and two shells fell near the airport's arrival terminal Tuesday morning, Kobia said. There were no reports of damage or casualties.

Kobia said the UN contingent in Rwanda sent a team Tuesday to investigate reports that 500 people had been

killed in displaced camps in the town of Kabgayi about 35 kilometers (20 miles) southwest of Kigali.

"While awaiting confirmation, we have protested the atrocities and called on the parties to give protection to displaced people who are behind their lines," he said.

"We condemn these atrocities, we are alarmed by them, we have called on all the parties to protect people's civil rights."

Tony Burgener, spokesman for the international Red Cross in Geneva, could not immediately confirm the new massacre. But he noted that massacres have continued relentlessly throughout Rwanda for weeks, including continuous killings in the Kabgayi area.

"In our camp in Kabgayi, people are killed regularly," Burgener said.

"We have been in contact with the authorities... tried to

attract attention to this... tried to get some guards around the camps but nevertheless the massacres are continuing," he said.

People in the camps have told journalists in the past week that a few among them are taken out of the camps every day — and sometimes at night — never to be seen again.

Journalists who travelled to the area in the past week report thousands of people living in squalid fields and in at least three church compounds. They likened conditions to those in World War II concentration camps, with people trapped and waiting to die.

"I saw people in a big fenced area," AP Photographer Joao Silva said after visiting Kabgayi late last week. "People were just looking at us through the fence. It was like pictures you've seen of concentration camps."

Kabgayi is just a few kilometers (miles) from Gitarama, the town to which Rwanda's self-appointed interim government fled shortly after the killing started in April.

Kobia said most people sheltering in the camps there are ethnic Tutsis, the minority that has been the main target of attacks over the past eight weeks by government soldiers and civilian militias armed by extremists in ethnic Hutu political parties.

He called on the world to respond quickly to a UN Security Council request of two weeks ago for more peacekeepers and military equipment so that UN blue helmets could guard such camps and help in evacuations of people trapped in Kigali. Only a few countries have agreed to send troops, and the United Nations is still trying to negotiate equipment from other nations.

Harmony, the Cessna 210 modified with an extra 100-gallon (380-litre) fuel tank, is to carry the pair from Meadville to Glasgow, Scotland. Arnspiger bought it for this trip.

When Vicki — then age 11 — and her parents stopped in Columbus on their cross country flight, Arnspiger greeted her. They began talking of a trans-Atlantic flight.

Arnspiger and two of his instructors, Willis and Mike Riley, of Columbus, teamed up to coach Vicki.

The Cessna 210 is heavier and more difficult to handle than the Cessna 172 that Vicki flew to California.

"I have never seen anyone, adult or child, with that amount of experience handle a 210 that well," said Willis, an instructor with 20 years' experience.

This will be Vicki's second trip over the Atlantic. In February, she accompanied Arnspiger as far as Iceland when he delivered a plane to Croatia.

Conference on East Timor opens after court ruling

MANILA: May 31: A conference on Indonesia's annexation of East Timor opened Tuesday after the Supreme Court ruled it could go ahead as planned, reports AP.

However, the high tribunal also upheld President Fidel Ramos' authority to ban foreigners from the session.

Ramos had banned 34 foreigners, including the wife of French President Francois Mitterrand, from the five-day conference.

At least 25 foreigners registered as delegates. But 14, including Nobel Peace Prize winner Mairead Maguire of Ireland, were turned back at Ninoy Aquino International Airport.

Danielle Mitterrand, president of the human rights group France Liberte, on Monday, told reporters in Paris that Indonesia applied "tyrannical pressure on us and

on the Philippine government to keep me from going to that meeting."

She said Indonesia threatened to pull 300 million dollar in contracts it has with the Philippines.

Indonesia has been accused of widespread human rights abuses in East Timor.

Indonesian officials were not immediately available for comment, but Indonesia's foreign minister has called the conference "a platform to attack and discredit Indonesia".

The foreign participants, supported by a human chain-link of students, nuns and priests, marched from a hostel inside the state-run University of the Philippines, to the nearby conference site a few hours after the ruling overturning a lower court order Friday to stop the meeting.

Off the Record

Teenage flying ace set to conquer the Atlantic

COLUMBUS: Ohio: A 12-year-old girl who last year flew across the United States will try to conquer the Atlantic this week, reports AP.

Vicki Van Meter is scheduled to take off Saturday from her home airport in Meadville, Pa., on a two-day flight across the ocean with Groveport pilot Curt Arnspiger by her side. She would be the youngest girl to fly the Atlantic, he said.

To prepare for the flight, Vicki has been commuting to Columbus every weekend for more than a month. Groveport is 10 miles southeast of the city.

Arnspiger, a 38-year-old real estate agent, has logged about 1,600 hours at the controls and received his instructor rating last week, enabling him to accompany Vicki.

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She used her hair to darn son's trousers

HAMALLAJ, Albania: She is 98 and clings to a reminder of nearly half a century in the labour camps of Europe's last Stalinist regime: her son's pants, mended with hair she pulled from her own head, reports AP.

The trousers are a keepsake of the worse of times, but not much has changed for Mrika Markutgaj and her family since Albania's communist government slipped into history three years ago.

They and many others of an estimated 350,000 former inmates — more than 10 per cent of the population — still live in their prison-camp quarters. They have nowhere else to go, particularly on government pensions worth 20 dollar a month.

Officials promised to raise the pensions to 120 dollar, but the former prisoners have yet to see the money.

Mrs Markutgaj, dressed all in black with a black kerchief around her grey hair, is one of the oldest survivors. She is leathery and toothless, her hands tremble, but her mind is sharp.

Tears shining in her eyes, she recalled the 1950s in the dreaded Tepelena camp when her son Gjon, now 57, was young.

"These were Gjon's trousers when he was 16," she said. "In the Tepelena camp I had no thread, so I used my own hair to mend them. You see? I had no grey hair then."

The garment is mended and patched in so many places that it is nearly impossible to determine which cloth was the original.

US, Russia bow to hardliners

MOSCOW: May 31: Bowing to hard-liners' pressure, Russia and the United States dropped plans Tuesday for joint military maneuvers in Russia and said they hope to hold the first-ever such exercises on American soil instead, reports AP.

No date or base was given for proposed new maneuvers, which were to have sent some 250 US troops to Russia for a week in July to work with an equal number of Russian officers and soldiers.

Sen. Sam Nunn, D-Ga., head of a delegation of seven US senators, said the final decision would be up to the two nations' presidents.

Although the maneuvers were aimed at helping prepare for future United Nations peacekeeping operations, the

idea of US troops coming to Russia so soon after the Cold War raised nationalists' hackles. Extremist Vladimir Zhirinovsky and others denounced the exercises as a sinister American plot to undermine Russia.

Shortly after the April 11 announcement, in an apparent effort to persuade some of his foes to sign a political truce, President Boris Yeltsin announced the plans would be reconsidered.

On Tuesday, Nunn, chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, and his counterpart in the Duma, the lower house of the Russian parliament, said they strongly advocated going ahead with the exercises but in the United States.

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